

## **Asian Americans: A Growing Force in City Politics** **by Larry Tung** **20 Jan 2009**



Photo by Tom Good through [Wikipedia Commons](#)

New York City Councilmember John Liu (at the podium) at a press conference on term limits last October on the steps of City Hall.

John Liu, a Taiwan-born former business consultant who moved to the U.S. at the age of 5, made history in New York politics in 2001 as the first Asian American elected to the City Council. This year he will write a new page by becoming the first Asian American to run for a citywide office as he [campaigns](#) to become the city's next public advocate.

An increasing number of Asians, many, like Liu, from Taiwan or born to immigrant parents from Taiwan, are competing for office in the city, particularly in Flushing, as their counterparts from Hong Kong are doing the same in Manhattan's Chinatown. While representing a possible new force in the city's already diverse political life, their emergence reveals generational splits and other divisions within New York's growing Asian communities.

### **Liu's Next Campaign**

Although Liu has not officially declared his candidacy for public advocate, the political director and treasurer of his campaign, Mei Ru, has confirmed his bid, and a [fundraiser](#) was held on Jan. 7. Chinese and English-language newspapers see him as a front-runner in the hotly contested race. Brooklyn Councilmember [Bill de Blasio](#) and civil rights attorney [Norman Siegel](#) have already announced their candidacies for the post, and Queens Councilmember Eric Gioia also is expected to enter the race.

According to the blog [PolitickerNY.com](#), Liu's campaign aides have confirmed that he has hired [Bill Lynch Associates](#), a public relations firm headed by former deputy mayor Bill Lynch, as his general consultant. He also has reportedly sought help from two well-known political marketing specialists, Jimmy Siegel and [Celinda Lake](#). Among those running for the public advocate, Liu topped the campaign fundraising chart with more than \$3 million.

### **Flushing Makes History**

Liu represents City Council [District 20](#), which covers parts of northeast Queens, including Flushing, Queensboro Hill, Kissena Park, Harding Heights, Auburndale and some of Whitestone. His district is home to the city's largest Asian community. Some New Yorkers jokingly refer to the area as "Flu Shing Province of China" because of its large Chinese population, and Chinese signs and businesses can be seen in every street corner. Many Koreans live in the area as well.

Among the Chinese-speaking population in New York, Flushing is the "Mandarin-speaking" Chinatown because the residents are primarily Mandarin speakers from Taiwan and central and northern China. Manhattan's Chinatown is Cantonese-speaking since most people there are from Hong Kong or Canton (now Guangdong) Province.

Liu, a Democrat, did not make history on his first try. He ran for City Council in 1997 and lost to six-term incumbent Julia Harrison, who earned [notoriety](#) for comments many perceived as anti-Asian.

Nor was Liu the first Asian American to run for New York City Council. [Pauline Chu](#), a former president of Community School Board 25, ran against Harrison in the [1991 Democratic primary](#) and lost. Harrison then defeated Chun Soo Pyun, a former president of the Korean Businessmen's Association, by a large margin in the general election.

Ethel Chen, a retired librarian and onetime head of the Asian American Democratic Association in Queens, had a string of unsuccessful runs for office, as did Meilin Tan, a Republican. Both remain well-known figures in the Flushing community, and other candidates seek their support.

In 2001, Harrison had to vacate the seat because of term limits, and that time, Liu got enough support from within and beyond the Asian American community to [win](#). He was re-elected in 2003 and 2005.

## State Assembly Race



Photo by [China Daily](#)

Liu's victory in 2001 provided a much needed boost in confidence for New York's Asian American community. Three years later, Jimmy Meng, a former president of the Flushing Chinese Business Association, became the second Asian American to [win](#) an important local election, capturing [Flushing's seat](#) in the New York State Assembly.

Meng had [lost to Barry Grodenchik](#) in 2002. Two years later, though, the situation was reversed, and Meng won the Democratic nomination, defeating Grodenchik. He then went on to gain a landslide 70 percent of the vote in the general election, defeating Meilin Tan.

However, Meng's campaign created some controversy. Simon Ting, an aide to Meng, later [was indicted](#) on charges that he faked voter registration documents. Meng did not run for re-election in 2006, citing health problems.

The contest to replace him revealed sharp schisms in the Flushing Asian community. In 2006, the race pitted his daughter, Grace Meng, against Ellen Young, a Taiwanese immigrant who served as a district aide to John Liu.

The intense race ended when Meng dropped out of the race after Young charged she did not live in the district as required by law. Young won the primary and general election, becoming the first Asian American woman elected to the New York state legislature.

But the rivalry between Young and Meng -- and between the Meng family and Liu -- did not end. Last year, they had a rematch in the Democratic primary that was widely viewed as a power struggle between Liu's camp and his rivals. The feud also focused attention on generational differences among Asian politicians.

Meng, a lawyer and chairwoman of the Queens Chinese Women's Association, garnered support from Harrison and Terence Park, who both ran against Liu before. Meng also claimed that her American-born background gave her an edge over Young.

"I'm someone who was born and raised here. I'm comfortable with the culture. I'm comfortable with the language," Meng [said](#) during the campaign. Meng's camp assailed Young for not having a college degree (she finished junior college in Taiwan) and, they said, of not being able to reach beyond the Chinese community. Young's immigrant background, once seen as an asset, had become a liability. Meng won by a double-digit margin.

## **Chinatown's Dilemma**

While Queen's has now elected three Asian politicians, with more almost certainly on the way, the primarily Cantonese-speaking Manhattan Chinatown has not been able to send any Asian Americans to City Council or the state legislature -- even though it has been the center for New York Chinese American life since the first [large wave](#) of Cantonese immigrants settled here in the late 1800s.

Chinatown sits in [District 1](#), one of the most ethnically and economically diverse districts in the city, covering SoHo, TriBeCa, Greenwich Village, Battery Park City, the Financial District, Little Italy and the Lower East Side.

After the district's creation in 1991, [Kathryn Freed](#), a lawyer, defeated Asian American candidates in consecutive elections to serve as the area's council member. In 2001, Freed had to step down due to term limits. Alan Gerson, also a lawyer, [won](#) the Democratic primary, defeating six opponents including three Asian Americans: housing advocate Margaret Chin; Rocky Chin, a public-interest attorney; and Kwang Hui, a labor activist.

At the beginning of the 2001 campaign, many political observers expected District 1 would choose an Asian American council member. Many attribute the failure to do so to the fact that Chinatown is primarily a place of work, business and entertainment for Asian New Yorkers, not the neighborhood where they live. In addition, many Chinatown residents are undocumented and so cannot vote. Meanwhile, Asian American voters seem to have difficulties presenting a united front in the area.

Chinatown has, however, elected Chinese judges to the Civil Court. The Second Municipal Court District, which covers roughly the same area as City Council District 1, elected [Doris Ling-Cohan](#) to the Civil Court in 1995. In 2006, [Margaret Chan](#), an immigrant from Hong Kong, was elected to the same court.

2009 will see more efforts to elect a Chinese American to represent District 1 in City Council, although Gerson is believed likely to seek re-election. Margaret Chin, who just announced her fourth bid for the City Council, left her position as the deputy executive director of [Asian Americans for Equality](#) to focus on her [campaign](#). An immigrant from Hong Kong who came to the U.S. at the age of 9, Chin has been an advocate for affordable housing, access to social services and government assistance for low-income immigrant families.

Jan Lee, a third-generation Chinatown resident and business owner, also has expressed interest in the race to run but has not made a final decision on whether to run.

## Filling Liu's Seat

With Liu seeking to move on, several established community leaders and a new generation of political leaders in Flushing hope to fill his City Council seat.

Yen S. Chou, president of the Chinese American Parent-Student Council and a member of District 26 Community Education Council, is among them. An educator who has devoted her career to helping immigrant families, Chou was elected to Community School Board 26 before the Bloomberg administration restructured the Department of Education. Also a native of Taiwan, she has attracted support from many community leaders and organizations.

Meanwhile, other political families could challenge the Mengs. James Wu, Ethel Chen's son, has been an active member of the Democratic Club of Queens. A Democratic district leader in Queens, he has registered his City Council bid with the City's Board of Elections.

Oliver Tan, the son of Meilin Tan, teamed up with his mother, and was elected a Republican district leader in 2007, a position his mother has held since 1992. Oliver Tan also served as the manager for Peter Koo's failed State Assembly [campaign in 2008](#). Tan would face formidable odd in the Democratic district, but is expected to rise in Queen's Republican circles.

## Taiwan Connection

The Flushing politicians share a connection to Taiwan, but there are generational differences between them.

Pauline Chu, Jimmy Meng, Ethel Chen and Meilin Tan represent the first generation of New York Asian American politicians. All four were born in China but moved to Taiwan as young children and were educated there. They are part of a massive [tide](#) of immigrants from Taiwan who started to form a community in Flushing in the 1970s. Now Flushing is home to the largest Mandarin-speaking community in New York, including many newcomers from China who arrived after the 1990s.

John Liu represents what scholars refer to as the "1.5 generation" -- those born abroad but who moved to the United States before their teens and so share characteristics of both first and second generations.



Grace Meng represents the 22nd District in the New York State Assembly

The second generation, by definition, was born in the United States to immigrant parents from Taiwan. These include Grace Meng, James Wu and Oliver Tan. They inherited their parents' resources and are eager to develop their own paths.

Grace Meng is by far the most successful of these politicians. Her work as a coordinator for her father's campaign and her increased involvement in the community after her loss in 2006 paid off. Meanwhile, her campaign strategy to present her as the open-minded candidate who can reach beyond the Chinese community has proved to be effective. Her victory is an indicator that the new generation's time might be just around the corner.

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